

San Juan Bautista

State Historic Park



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At San Juan Bautista State Historic Park you can visualize, in one compact area, several successive phases of California history. During the Mexican period, San Juan Bautista served as the military and commercial center of the San Benito Valley. Many historic buildings representative of this exciting mix of cultures and events are preserved and restored here. Your visit will help you to understand some of the dramatic moments, personal triumphs and disasters hidden behind the quiet scenery of the present.

The Mutsun

Prior to the Spanish occupation of California, the San Juan Valley was the home of the Mutsun Indians. In one of their villages on the eastern edge of San Juan Bautista, the Mutsun built beehive-shaped dwellings of willow and coarse grass.

The men, who often went naked in the mild climate, hunted with chert and obsidian spear points and arrowheads. Usually dressed in a pair of aprons, the women gathered acorns, berries and seeds to grind in stone mortars. The versatility of the baskets the women created is illustrated by their many uses: food storage; carrying loads; trapping fish; leaching

acorns. When heated rocks were dropped into tightly woven, water-filled baskets, they became cooking vessels, as well. The Mutsun enjoyed ball games, field hockey, dice games, gambling, singing and dancing, and made music with bird bone whistles, flutes and rattles.

The last full-blooded Mutsun Indian, Mrs. Ascension Solarsano Cervantes, died in January 1930 and is buried in the Indian Cemetery beside the old Mission Church.

The Mission

The buildings facing San Juan Bautista's central plaza represent several periods of California history. The mission, founded in 1797, is the oldest building. Padre Fermin Francisco de Lasuen chose this location because there were many Indians in the area, and because it was about a day's walk from both Mission Santa Clara and Mission San Carlos Borromeo at Carmel. Excellent soil and a good water supply, as well as timber, lime and sandstone, were available nearby.

At one time some 1,200 Indians lived and worked at this mission. More than 4,300 are buried in the old cemetery beside the northeast wall of the mission church, along with a number of Spanish Californians. The church itself, the largest mission church in



California, was started in 1803, and despite damage from numerous earthquakes, it has been in continuous use since July 1, 1812. The altar wall was painted by Thomas Doak, a sailor who left his ship and is said to have been the first U.S. citizen to settle in Spanish California.

Today, visitors may tour part of the mission, where historical artifacts and exhibits are on display. The buildings still belong to the Catholic Church and are not part of San Juan Bautista State Historic Park. Visitors' donations are used to offset the cost of keeping the mission open to the public.

El Camino Real

Next to the old stone wall below the cemetery, a short section of *El Camino Real*—The King's Highway—can still be seen as it leaves the broad, flat plain and climbs diagonally up the hill to enter San Juan's central plaza. This is the highway that connected all of the California missions and later served as one of California's major stage and wagon roads. Our modern highway system follows portions of the original route.

San Juan De Castro

In 1836 the town of San Juan, close to the old mission, became known as San Juan de Castro. Earlier, José Tiburcio Castro became the civil, or secular, administrator of the mission. Acting in accordance with the mission secularization decree issued that year, he divided the mission property between friends, neighbors, relatives and some former neophytes.

The Castro (Breen) Adobe was built between 1838 and 1841, at the request of his son José Antonio Castro, Prefect of the northern district. It was intended to serve as the judicial and administrative headquarters of a district that included the entire northern half of Alta California. However, José Antonio Castro was unable to spend much time there. After 1840 military responsibilities required him to travel extensively. In 1843 San Juan once again became the rallying point for a military revolt, as Castro organized friends and family to overthrow and deport Governor Micheltoarena. Later, Castro became commanding general of Mexican military forces in California and was preoccupied with the threat of foreign invasion and other problems caused by the flood of immigrants beginning to arrive in California.

The Gavilan Peak Affair

John C. Frémont and his company of U.S. "surveyors" had been allowed to winter in California provided they stayed away from the coastal settlements. In March 1846 they suddenly appeared in the hills near Monterey. Castro notified Frémont that he would have to leave California, but Frémont ignored the demand and led his men to the summit of Gavilan Peak, now known as Fremont Peak, overlooking San Juan. After three days, following an exchange of diplomatic (and some not-so-diplomatic) messages, Frémont decided to comply and withdrew, "slowly and growlingly," as he later described it.

On July 7, 1846, after the outbreak of war between Mexico and the U.S., Commodore Sloat landed his troops at Monterey and claimed California for the United States. In November of that year, Frémont returned to San Juan Bautista as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army and spent nearly two weeks gathering horses, mules and supplies for his 428-man army. Known as the California Battalion, Frémont's army left San Juan on November 28, 1846. Despite considerable hardship, they met with Andres Pico to sign the Treaty of Cahuenga, ending the armed hostilities between the U.S. and Mexico.



José Castro

Castro-Breen Adobe

Today, the Castro-Breen Adobe, with its red tile roof and full-length balcony, looks much as it did when the Castros first built it.

As members of the ill-fated Donner Party, Patrick and Margaret Breen and their seven children had been stranded in the Sierra Nevada without supplies for 111 days during the extraordinary snowstorms of 1846. It is said that they arrived penniless in San Juan and were given free shelter in the mission. Early in 1848, when word came that gold had been discovered in the Sierra foothills, one of the Breen children, 16-year-old John, set out for the goldfields and returned with about \$10,000 in gold dust.

In December 1848 the Breens purchased the Castro adobe and later 400 acres of prime agricultural land in the San Juan Valley. Until 1933, when it became part of the State Historic Park, the old adobe building was occupied by succeeding generations of the Breen family and their employees.

Behind the Castro-Breen Adobe is a delightful garden and several large cast-iron caldrons. An interpretive panel shows how these tallow caldrons were used in the busy hide and tallow trade during the Spanish-Mexican period of California history.



Check at Ranger Station in the Plaza Hotel for scheduled interpretive activities.



San Juan Bautista State Historic Park

Mission Cemetery

Original El Camino Real

Mission Church

Monastery Wing



Plaza

Vicky Cottage

Wash House

Plaza Hall

Restrooms

First Floor Accessible

Blacksmith Shop

Plaza Stable

Second Street

Cabin

Mariposa Street

Plaza Hotel

Castro-Breen Adobe

First Floor Accessible

Washington Street

Jail

Restrooms

Third Street

Franklin Street

The Plaza Hotel

Facing the plaza next to the Castro/Breen Adobe is the hotel that Angelo Zanetta built in 1858. It has been restored to look as it did in the 1860s, when San Juan Bautista was an important stop on the stage route between Northern and Southern California.

Zanetta, a professional restaurateur and hotel man, had already established a reputation for fine food and service in New Orleans, Monterey and San Juan hotels. In 1858 he purchased the land and the low-slung adobe buildings that stood next to the Castro adobe facing the plaza. The buildings had housed Spanish soldiers as early as 1813-14, but their walls were still solid.

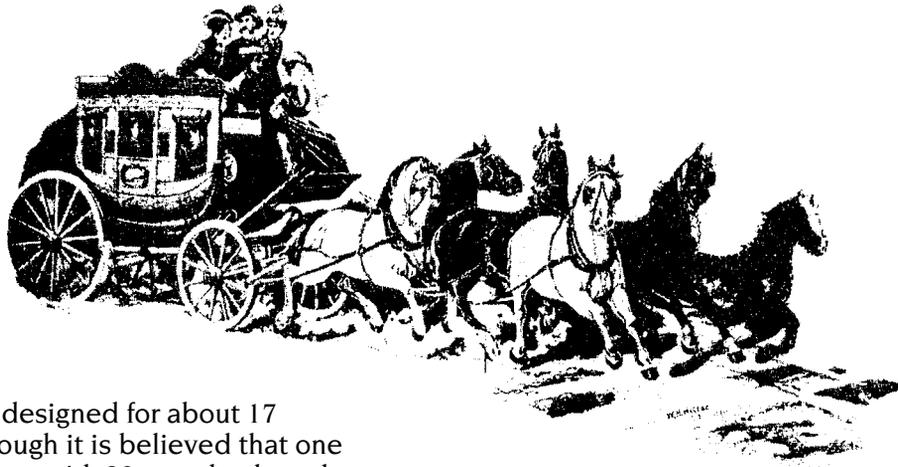


Zanetta added a wooden second story complete with balcony, sleeping rooms and other conveniences. The hotel's grand opening in January 1859 was widely advertised, and the hotel's dining room and bar quickly became famous for their fine food and drink. Zanetta's reputation as a genial host also spread far and wide.

Plaza Stable

The Plaza Stable was built around 1874 to handle the extensive stage and wagon traffic during San Juan's busiest years. It was operated by a succession of men, including John Comfort, a partner of Zanetta's who also operated the Plaza Hotel Bar. At one time, there were seven stage lines operating through San Juan and up to eleven coaches arriving and departing daily. The bulk of the traffic was between San Francisco and Los Angeles, but San Juan was also on the main route between the San Benito Mountain quicksilver mines, Hollister, Watsonville, Monterey and Santa Cruz. It was the primary staging, trade and supply center for a wide area of cattle and sheep ranches.





Stages were designed for about 17 passengers, though it is believed that one once left San Juan with 29 people aboard. The stage driver was an important man, well paid and much admired. If he asked his passengers to get out and walk across bad spots in the road or up steep grades—as often happened on the famous San Juan Grade just west of town—there was no room for argument.

Though the roads were continually being improved, heavy use by four- and six-horse teams made them extremely dusty throughout much of the year. It was natural that as stages arrived in town, gentlemen would head for the barroom for a touch of something liquid to “irrigate their windpipes.” Ladies rushed for the restrooms to powder their noses and shake out their linen “dusters.”

When the railroad bypassed San Juan Bautista, the little town’s boom years were over. The stable has been restored to its original appearance, when it was handling the well-groomed, well-matched teams of the Coast Line Stage Company. Inside, an assortment of carriages and wagons is on display along with harnesses and other items. Behind the stable is a blacksmith’s shop displaying many of the tools used in the wagonwright trade.

Plaza Hall

John Comfort and Angelo Zanetta acquired another piece of property facing the plaza. The old adobe building on the property may have housed cavalrymen and even earlier served as a *monjerio* or dormitory for unmarried mission Indian women. In 1868 Zanetta and Comfort used the adobe bricks to form the ground floor of a two-story building that they hoped would become the county courthouse of newly established San Benito County in 1870.

After Hollister was chosen as the county seat, the first floor of Plaza Hall was modified to serve as part of the hotel and later as the residence of the Zanetta family. The second floor was used for public meetings and celebrations. Laid over 30-foot-long redwood beams, the floor of the upstairs hall had good “spring” and became famous as a dance floor. Many a grand ball was held there, as were political rallies, temperance meetings, traveling shows and gatherings of local groups such as the volunteer firemen.



Plaza Hall

Tiburcio Vasquez

One of California's most famous outlaws was associated with San Juan during the 1860s and '70s. Born and raised in Monterey, Tiburcio Vasquez stayed in San Juan, where his mother operated a Mexican restaurant on Third Street for a time, and had many friends in the San Benito and Gavilan Mountains around Hollister and San Juan. Like Joaquin Murrietta, Vasquez was a legend in his own time. He was said to have had a way with women and was widely considered a brave, cunning and, at times, gallant fellow. His activities were well-documented by witnesses and thoroughly reported by the newspapers of the time. This made him a hero of sorts to Mexican Californios who often helped him outwit law enforcement officers and their posses.



- **Site of one of California's twenty-one Franciscan missions**
- **District headquarters for the northern half of Alta California**
- **Rallying point for two revolutions**
- **Site of an international incident**
- **Staging, trade, and supply center**
- **Locale of a famous bandit**

